# ISLANDERS

## JO TORR 2001–2013 SURVEY

# Contents

# Introduction

*Philip Clarke* Director

In Aotearoa New Zealand we are all islanders. *Islanders: Jo Torr 2001–2013* surveys the work of New Zealand sculptor Jo Torr whose practice considers cultural exchange through the lens of costume and textile history. She is fascinated by the history of early encounters between European and Polynesian peoples both in New Zealand and in wider Polynesia, which often involved the exchange of cloth. Her works unite materials and designs associated with Polynesia and forms frequently associated with Europe. This distinctive fusion of contemporary making with authentic historical costumery is unique in New Zealand. Since 2001 Torr has created and exhibited a number of discrete suites of work. *Islanders* assembles works from eleven different suites for the first time, together with brand new works made for Objectspace

Torr's project is not a historical project. It is a contemporary ongoing art project that references historical instances, both specific and general, of the meeting of cultures in the South Pacific. Her works defy easy categorisation and this is one reason why Objectspace was very keen to work with Jo Torr. Are the works contemporary or heritage objects? Art, craft or design? Costume or art object? European or Polynesian? It seems to me that Torr amplifies, and then deftly deploys, the indefinableness of her works to evoke the temporality and surprise of encounters. These works seem to reside on an island of their own. This is a place of chthonic familiarity, even though we visit the island infrequently and see works that we have not seen before. This is the delight of Torr's work, the ability to conjure moments of encounter that make us wide-eyed and then reflect on our responses and assumptions about histories.

Objectspace is very grateful to Jo Torr for agreeing to work with us on *Islanders* and Mark Hutchins Gallery for assisting this project. *Islanders*' essayists Chanel Clarke, Kolokesa Māhina-Tuai and Andrew Paul Wood have provided three quite different perspectives on Jo Torr's practice which makes this publication itself an encounter and exchange. Both Tamaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum and MOTAT (Museum of Transport and Technology) have provided practical assistance to Objectspace for which we are very grateful.

*Islanders* is being staged as part of the 2013 Auckland Arts Festival and Objectspace is delighted, to be once again, part of the Festival programme. What does one hope to experience at a festival? Encounters with new works and experiences that provoke wonder and reflection upon what we know is what many of us are seeking. I am sure you will find this in *Islanders: Jo Torr 2001–2013*.

# A conversation with Jo Torr

*18 and 22 February 2013*

*You describe yourself as a sculptor. When did you decide to work with textiles to create sculptures?*

I used textiles in my sculpture in my second year at Elam in the 80s. At that time I was experimenting with various materials, techniques and concepts as one does at Art School. It wasn't until 2000 that I started using textiles again to make sculpture.

*What relationship do you see between costume and sculpture?*

The difference between costume and sculpture is about intent. I call my work sculpture because it is three-dimensional and conceptual; it is created as art and carries all the baggage that [the term art] implies. Costume is created for performance, fashion or play. From a fashion perspective, certainly the world's leading couturiers create garments that push boundaries and sometimes veer toward sculpture.

*Do you ever imagine someone wearing your work?*

These works can be worn, but I don't make them to be worn as I regard them to be sculpture. I am adamant that I don't make clothes for people. The first works of this kind that I created were presented on models at the exhibition openings, and were photographed being worn. This was a period of experimentation about how they should be viewed and over time I have become more firm in my belief that they should be exhibited on ambiguous body forms.

I do enjoy the way they defy categorization, in multiple ways, which means that they have been shown in a wide range of contexts, from public and dealer art galleries, craft galleries, museums, and even retail showrooms.

*You've been complimented on the "costume authenticity" of your work. How important is this quality in your work? How have you developed your knowledge and skills in this area?*

I have always sewn and adapted commercially available sewing patterns. When I began making these works I quickly realised I did not know enough about pattern-cutting, so I completed a Graduate Diploma in Design (Fashion) at Massey University (Wellington). I supplemented this knowledge with research into historical methods, materials and techniques. I am learning all the time. Needless to say, I am not reproducing historical garments. My garments are cut for a 21st century body-shape, use 21st century construction methods, and utilise materials that were probably not available at the time.

*Kolokesa Māhina-Tuai talks about your works as "reference points in a history of cultural exchanges". What is it about cultural exchange that interests you?*

I think the interest for me lies in the presence of mutuality in moments of cultural exchange; two groups meeting each other, and in so doing, affecting each other. Viewers will respond to my works according to their own history and what they know or feel; they may interpret them in terms of colonialism, unfairness or imbalance. I get excited when that happens as it means the works are 'speaking'.

*You have chosen to explore cultural exchange through the lens of costume and textiles. What do you think costume contributes to an understanding of cultural exchange?*

Cloth figured prominently in the earliest exchanges between European and Pacific peoples. Each culture considered the cloth of the other as fascinating and exotic. What is common and familiar becomes rare and unique in a new context. Working with cloth and costume allows me to explore exchange with this knowledge and from my own European perspective and history, while at the same time providing me with an opportunity to work with Polynesian aesthetics and materials, to create something contemporary. The works I make don't actually exist in history.

*It's interesting to note that your works aren't historically accurate, especially as questions of authenticity have been at the fore with many cultures. How do you think your practice relates to issues of authenticity?*

Authenticity is a theme that runs through my work. For example, *The Gauguin Suite* is concerned with issues of authenticity as much as it is about European stereotypes. One aspect is to do with the printed cotton itself. Lava lava cloth, which is a prime signifier of

'Polynesian', was originally designed and produced in Manchester, England, in the mid nineteenth century. Now this type of fabric is produced in Asia and still consumed in the Pacific and by Pacific Island communities.

The versions of these prints made today are not faithful version of 18th and 19th century printed fabrics. Originally they were two colours with big designs of hibiscus flowers with stripes. Now, the patterning is more diverse, much smaller, and multicoloured.

*When Objectspace began publicising **Islanders**, we were asked if you are personally affiliated with Pacific and Māori cultures. How do you feel about these sorts of enquiries and their implicit, critical assumptions?*

I am aware of some sense of implicit criticism of me for touching on the subjects I do. I am of European origin and this is my perspective. I am aware that if my heritage was Polynesian more opportunities would have been open to me. I have received mostly overwhelmingly positive comments about my use of Pacific and Māori imagery and only one piece of criticism over naming my works with the Māori terms for cloaks, maintaining that they weren't cloaks and could not be used that way. In that case I had lively conversation with that person and we maintain a friendly and mutually supporting relationship. On the other hand I have received many great responses from Pacific people who have been excited about an aspect of their culture or history expressed in my work. Some have gone on to give me materials for my work and have offered help in other ways. I feel encouraged, naturally, by this sort of response

*These cloaks you've just referred to are found in the **Ngā Kakāhu** suite. Tell us about this group of works.*

This suite is about the way blankets replaced cloaks as garments and the way this new material, wool unravelled from blankets, was integrated into the evolution of cloak making.

We have a tendency these days to think that there were always feather cloaks, but there has always been an evolution. Pre-European cloaks that were recorded at first contact had practical applications, such as rain capes or the prestigious kahu kuri (dogskin cloaks) that were densely woven and acted as a kind of armour. As dogs interbred, the plain kaitaka started being much more prominent as prestigious garments. Because they're plain, the quality of the muka (the dressed flax fibre used in Māori cloaks) and the way they're woven show the weaver's skill. The applied 'thatching' of rain capes morphed into hukahuka; the decorative threads on the type of cloak known as korowai.

There is a theory that the decorative coloured woollen yarn elements on cloaks are an adoption and adaption of the embroidery techniques taught to Māori by missionaries. Coloured woollen yarn was also used in the decorative cloak borders known as tāniko.

In *Ngā Kakāhu* I have used plain cream woollen blankets to stand in for muka and woollen needlepoint to replicate tāniko.

*In the last few years a number of people have worked with blankets to reference garments from the colonial period. Your work looks quite different. Could you tell us about the forms you've constructed?*

I studied the Burton Brothers' photographs of Māori taken on an expedition through the Whanganui area and into the Waikato. There are theories that the clothing Māori wore in studio photographs were props. The 1880s Burton Brothers' images show Māori wearing cloaks, blankets, and European dress, often a combination of all three. I looked at photographs and dress from the time, and constructed the forms from there.

Quite often, the blankets Māori wore were plaid blankets. The first blankets I collected to use were also plaid, but in the end it seemed appropriate to use cream blankets because they are reminiscent of muka. The form of 1880s European gowns contain embellishment of different kinds and lots of draping by combining a European dress style with Māori cloak embellishments, it was an opportunity to comment of the kinds of cultural exchange that was occurring.

*In her essay, Kolokesa Māhina-Tuai notes that some of the imagery used in your work may, at a first glance, conjure up romanticised stereotypes*

*of pacific peoples. She refers to the use of brightly coloured fabrics in* ***The Gauguin Suite*** *and using the terms 'Dusky Maiden', 'Noble Savage' and 'Pacific Princess' in* ***Pa'i Ki'i****. How do you address the reality of cultural stereotypes?*

I am so pleased with this response to *The Gauguin Suite* and *Pai'i Ki'i* because that is precisely what I wanted to convey. *The Gauguin Suite* encourages the viewer to think about what it is that informs our ideas of what is 'Pacific' or 'Polynesian' and also carries questions of authenticity. *Pai'i Ki'i* explores the idea of the 'European Gaze', focusing on at a time when photography techniques allowed a flow of images of Pacific peoples back to Europe creating an interest in the 'other' while the subjects of the photographs were as much fascinated by the process itself.

Another aspect is the romanticised stereotypes from a European viewpoint. The forms of the gowns — the styles dating from the 1770s through to the mid 1950s — are regularly categorised as 'Victorian'.

*Could you explain how "The Gauguin suite encourages the viewer to consider what informs our ideas of what is 'Pacific' or 'Polynesian'"?*

What we know about first exchanges is largely informed by what Europeans wrote. This could have been the journals of Captain James Cook and the first explorers, and then the missionaries, and other visitors, such as Paul Gauguin and Robert Louis Stevenson. Over time, you start to build up stereotypes that are informed by these accounts.

Whether they are authentically Polynesian or not ceases to matter over times, especially as Polynesians started to adopt printed cloth as signifiers of their Polynesian-ness. If we want to identify ourselves (and that could be anyone, you or me) as Pacific, we grab a lei, or a Hawaiin shirt, or a lava lava.

***The Islanders*** *exhibition will exhibit all of the works from your suite* ***The Society Islands****. What instances of cultural exchange are you exploring in this group of works?*

Tahitians were the first Pacific people that came into contact with European. Tahiti was the first place Cook went to because Samuel Wallis had been there two years earlier, on the ship *Dolphin*, and recommended that Tahiti was a good place to observe the Transit of Venus in 1769. Tahiti was also the first place that missionaries went to in the Pacific, slightly later in 1797.

Pre-contact, tapa [bark cloth] in Tahiti was largely plain or it was decorated with dots or lines; you only need to look at tapa in museum collections to verify this. After exposure to European cloth, Tahitians started direct printing their tapa with leaves and ferns. Cook collected examples which were taken back to Britain.

The other interesting thing is that the styles of dress during that period have remarkable similarities to what we now consider to be missionary dress; a long, loose-fitting yoked gown, generally known across the Pacific as the *Mother Hubbard*. In Hawaii it is called *Holukū*, and in Tahiti as *Ahu māmā rū'au* (grandmother's dress) and *Ahu tua*, which is loosely translated as 'empire dress'. *Empire* style is how we recognise the high waisted loose fitting styles of the late 18th and early 19th century in Europe.

*So how have you alluded to these exchanges in the works in* ***The Society Islands****?*

Embroidery of woven cloth was commonplace in English society, but it was unknown in pre-contact Polynesian society. I have swapped the decorative techniques of each society: using embroidery on tapa and tapa decoration printed on European woven cloth.

*Your practice to date has documented moments of exchange between Europeans and either Māori or Pacific peoples. Chanel Clarke suggests in her essay that interrelationships between Māori and Pacific cultures could provide a challenging, but rich topic for future investigation. What are your thoughts?*

I am often excited about the wealth of material to be explored and I have become aware of the interrelationships between Māori and Pacific cultures, often with a European aspect of context. This is indeed a rich area for future investigation. A challenge such as Chanel's makes it all the more enticing.

*How have you selected the instances of exchange you've focussed on to date?*

I'm always seeing, reading and hearing about interesting things, events and objects. Once my interest has been piqued, I will begin research to clarify the topic conceptually. Quite often I have to put the idea aside until the right time to take it up again.

For example, one instance of cultural exchange that has contemporary resonance is the trade of tattoo, both between Polynesian Island cultures and with Europeans. This trade or exchange in fact has quite a long history; you only have to look as far as the *Bounty* mutineers. I'm thinking about how this idea might be expressed sculpturally but not necessarily in a garment form.

*What has inspired some of your finished suites of works?*

Oh... lots of things. Two examples could be:

For the *Society Islands*, I came across written examples where European gowns were made of Tahitian tapa. There are at least two references to 18th century European gowns being made of tapa. At a Cook conference in Australia, Adrienne Keppler mentioned the story of a bundle of Tahitian tapa being given to a Professor at the University of Göttingen, Germany. His daughter then used this tapa to create a gown for a ball. She describes the gown to a friend in a letter. Two Te Papa curators heard this talk and told me the anecdote.

The works in the *Gauguin Suite* are named after Gauguin's paintings. If you look at Gauguin's *Vahine no te Tiare — Woman with a Flower*, you'll notice that my work uses the same colour palette.

*Do you think working at a place like Te Papa, which gives you access to a wide range of objects, has benefitted your practice?*

Definitely. My work place is a place that an avid museum goer would visit at the very most once a week but I am in a museum every day. I am surrounded by cultural material, interesting debates, and rich research resources. I am exposed to an amazing environment that is incredibly enriching, but I also have to put a rider on that. I don't have unfettered access to the collections, I have to ask for an appointment like anyone else, and sometimes my request is put aside or deferred because I am a familiar. Still, I know how privileged I am.

*Andrew Paul Wood describes your work as "unique documents of our place and time". What do you think about this observation?*

"Unique documents of our place and time" is a very astute and accurate observation. Each sculpture takes the form of a garment that incorporates an aspect of Polynesian or European cloth and an aesthetic sensibility associated with either culture. No other artist in New Zealand is using textiles and garments with historical and contemporary references as a sculptural expression in the way that I am and this can be considered both innovative and experimental. It is work that pushes the boundaries and challenges the way that we view and think about sculpture, aesthetics and cultures meeting and interacting. It is work that is definitely of this place and this time.

*It's interesting to understand that your works aren't historically accurate given that questions of authenticity have recently been at the fore...*

My work is considered to be beautiful and well made but it is also layered in terms of meaning. Viewers will bring their own knowledge and experience to the works and then reflect on their personal responses to the work.

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Jo Torr was born in 1957. She has qualifications in fine arts, librarianship, museum studies, and design. She is a practicing art exhibiting regularly and is represented by Mark Hutchins Gallery, Wellington.
Her work is held in the collections of Auckland Art Gallery, Tamaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum, Canterbury Museum, Dowse Art Museum, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Southland Arts Foundation, Te Manawa, and many other public and private collections.
Jo currently works as a museum registrar at Te Papa, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. She was awarded the William Hodges Fellowship in 2011.

# E koreahau e ngaro, hekākano i ruiamai i Rangiātea

I shall never be forgotten, for I am
the seed that was sown in Rangiātea.

This opening proverb is an apt one for *Islanders* given the content of Jo Torr's works over the years and is an opportunity to reflect on our own "island-ness". The New Zealand psyche is shaped by an understanding of ourselves as an island nation, and as islanders. We are all islanders even if only for the mere sake that we live in either the North or South Island.

As Māori we ventured forth across the Pacific Ocean in search of new island homelands. The proverb sums up our origins as Māori and speaks of our pride in those ancestors who navigated Te Moana Nui a Kiwa — The Great Ocean of Kiwa. We thrived and prospered for centuries on these isolated islands until those from far away Isles descended upon our shores. Waves of European settlers were followed more recently by our island cousins from the Pacific.

Settling the length and breadth of the country and its adjacent islands our ancestors may have all come from different places but their motivations for making this place their home were essentially the same. They were all in search of a better life and better prospects for themselves and their families. The resulting interaction and exchange between this mix of cultures has been the inspiration for Torr's creative endeavours over the last decade.

As an avid historian with a strong bent towards costume and textiles, I am always interested in uncovering the more nuanced versions of our relationships with each other over the centuries and therefore Torr's works have always had a particular appeal. *Islanders* provides a chance to bring all Torr's suites of work together and trace the direction of her practice over the last decade.

The seed was sown with her first work *The Gauguin Suite* (2001), which germinated further ideas and branches of investigation throughout the decade. The wider Pacific has been the inspiration for the bulk of her work and from the outset Torr has been interested in what it is that informs our ideas of what is Pacific or Polynesian. Familiar stereotypes become unfamiliar as Torr interrogates these ideas with her sculptural works. The colours, smells, sound, and textures of the Pacific are continually juxtaposed against the primness and formality of European style dress. At first glance her works appear strange and yet fascinating. The more you look, the more intriguing they become as they continually shift between being seemingly at ease, to being entirely uncomfortable and heavy from the weightiness of their ideas.

Her topics of investigation are often similar to those that have been explored by other contemporary artists however it is her medium of expression that sets her apart. Variously described as sculpture, costume, and conceptual art, her practice occupies an in-between space which echoes the conceptual in-between space that Torr seeks to explore. Her technical ability cannot be faulted and the finer details of cut, style, shape and decoration are always carefully considered. From an initial concentration in the Pacific her works moved closer to home with an exploration of customary Māori dress in *Ngā Kākahu* (2009). The types of cultural exchange between Polynesian and non-Polynesian people broadened out in later work to include interaction with the physical environment, such as her more recent suite exploring the ill-fated early European settler community on the Auckland Islands (*Blind Idealists Black Dog*, 2012).

*Ngā Kākahu* seems the most obvious leaping off point for me given its Māori content. However, for me the most obvious question was why did it take nearly nine years to address the local context? Why was it easier to address the Pacific before the Māori situation at home? As Māori, it is something we witness all the time as individuals and organisations often find it easier to deal with our "friendly" Pacific cousins than to deal with us "radical" Māori. Torr's chronological output mirrors the experience that Māori often face on a day-to-day basis. *Ngā Kākahu* was a response to a challenge laid down to Torr, which she admirably accepted.

As a Pākehā artist exploring these sometimes touchy themes of interaction between Polynesian and non-Polynesian peoples, is her gaze simply the same as those

nineteenth century artists she interrogates, such as Gauguin and other early nineteenth century photographers, but simply two centuries later and dressed up in a different guise? Is it her place to investigate this interaction? She can and no doubt has been criticised, though perhaps not out rightly, for daring to go there. Torr has made it clear however that the central theme that runs through her work has been that of mutual cultural exchange resulting from the contact between Polynesian and European peoples. "I'm not a Māori, not a PI. I'm a New Zealander brought up with these influences and I can only look at it from that point of view."

Notwithstanding her prolific output over the preceding decade, there are absences in Torr's work, unexplored territory where potentially the best is yet to come. With that in mind, the chosen proverb and the interrelationships that it implies — that between Māori and Pacific peoples — provides food for thought if she's prepared to venture.

The proverb is often quoted in order to reestablish the links between the cultures that all originate from the same place in the Pacific. It is the least explored aspect to date in Torr's work and probably the most challenging, but has the potential to unleash the most innovation for her creative practice. It was touched on in *Tupaia's Paintbox* (2005) and sat latent under the surface through other suites.

As Polynesian peoples we share the same homelands and have similar cultural values however our experience within New Zealand has often led us to share the same poor socio-economic, education and wellbeing statistics. We have shared similar but different experiences. The country-to-country migration that occurred during the 1950s and 1960s that is described in works such as *Nu'u Sila* (2002) mirrors the rural-urban migration experienced by Māori at the same time. These were trying times for Māori and Pacific people and for those that fell by the way side the gang culture of the early '70s and '80s was a mutually shared response. The badges of allegiance indicated by the clothes worn on one's back are rich pickings for a textile artist.

Historical relationships and shared cultural concepts such as manuhiri and tangatawhenua, tuākana and tēina are ripe for further exploration. What makes us different as Polynesians and what makes us the same? The creative medium that Torr has chosen to work within alludes to some of the diverse making traditions encompassing shape, design, material, and colour elements between Māori and Pacific cultures. Those suites with a definite Pacific theme could be described as light, bright, confident and fun in contrast to *Ngā Kākahu*, which appears dark, moody and austere.

These cross-cultural design traditions warrant further exploration, as does the performative aspect perhaps not yet fully realised within Torr's work to date. Torr's works are made as viable garments and yet are not worn. The irony in all this is that across the Pacific, including New Zealand, it is often those finer details and decorative elements that are activated with the assistance of a wearer or performer. The swish of a piupiu against the body the delicate quiver of hukahuka tags as one moves when enveloped within a cloak. The human interaction with the garment is missing and places me in agreement with Myers when she intimates that there is an almost "celebratory yearning for the body and the potential wearer."[1] The garments relationship to the body and the person are what enhances its mana. Without it they might as well just be mere museum specimens another ironic twist given the various locations of Torr's works.

There is a saying that if it feels uncomfortable walk towards it for it has the greatest potential for growth and understanding. A new challenge is laid.

Tēnākarawhiuamai!

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*Chanel Clarke*
Of Māori descent and currently the Curator Māori at Auckland Museum, New Zealand. Her specific interests are social and cultural aspects of dress in both traditional and contemporary contexts.

# Islanders: Jo Torr 2001–2013
# A Pacific perspective

I first encountered Jo Torr's work in late 2004 during the time we worked at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) where I was Curator of Pacific Cultures (2004–2008). I was shown a photograph of Torr's *Transit of Venus* (2004) suite and I was immediately drawn to the tapa work simply because of my familiarity with the material. My interest grew when, upon a closer look, I could tell that it was made of recycled Tongan ngatu tāhina (white-marked barkcloth). Although I gained clues regarding the obviously historical style of dress and the title, it was not until I read the contextual information about the suite that I was able to fully understand and appreciate the meaning behind the works.

The next occasion I came across Torr's work was in 2005 when my then colleague, Sean Mallon (Senior Curator Pacific Cultures), and I were considering Torr's *Tupaia's Paintbox* (2005) works to acquire for Te Papa's Pacific Collections. At this time Sean and I were working on *Tangata o le Moana: The story of Pacific people in New Zealand* exhibition[2] which involved considering new acquisitions to illustrate the story of the 1000 year history of Pacific peoples in New Zealand. One of the themes that this exhibition considered was early Pacific visitors and settlers in New Zealand. Two of the earliest visitors were the Tahitian priest Tupaia and his servant Taiato, who came with British explorer James Cook in 1769.[3] At the time we did not have anything in the Pacific Collections that could illustrate this story, which *Torr's Tupaia's Paintbox* (2005) did. Part of our consideration was around the fact that Torr was not of Pacific heritage, however the meaning behind her works and its strong alignment with the story of Tupaia offered a solid case for its acquisition.

One of the attributes that I really like about Torr's sculptures is that they are based on a strong historical foundation. Torr's sculptures can be read as reference points in a history of cultural exchanges. Each sculpture suite is layered with information and audience appreciation and understanding will vary depending on how informed they are. The historical basis, or the intangible component of Torr's Pacific inspired sculptures, is where I think a Pacific quality is most present in her practice. Historical stories about first encounters between Europeans and the people of the Pacific, Pacific peoples' experiences, how Pacific peoples' were perceived, portrayed and interpreted are embedded in each suite and for me provides the richness and depth to her sculptures. As mentioned earlier, it was the historical component of *Tupaia's Paintbox* (2005) that provided a rationale for Te Papa acquiring Torr's work for its Pacific Collections in 2006.

Torr's sculptures are all European in form with reference to the Pacific either in the materials used, the island vernacular used in the titles or the motifs/ images adorning the surface. The sculptural forms reference the clothing and textile style of the period of which the works are inspired by. There is depth in terms of the research behind the style of clothing and the type of textile of that period, which is then beautifully and skilfully constructed by the artist. The 'Pacific' elements of the physical works like *The Gauguin Suite* (2001), *Nu'u Sila* (2002), *Transit of Venus* (2005), *Stomachers and Pockets* (2007), and *Into the Southern Hemisphere* (2012) are simply in the materials used. The brightly coloured and Tongan ngatu (tapa) printed fabrics as well as the use of tapa (made from the bark of paper mulberry trees) for these sculptures are quite strong markers of the Pacific. Brightly coloured fabrics, like those used in *The Gauguin Suite* (2001), although predominantly made in China, on a passing level may conjure up the usual romanticised stereotypes of the wider Pacific and its peoples.

Pacific peoples have empowered themselves by embracing these fabrics to produce in innovative ways clothing ranging from casual wear, to formal wear to group uniforms either representing a church, village or sports team. The same can be said for the Tongan tapa printed fabric, which is obviously specific to Tonga, that people who wear it do so knowingly and proudly. You only need to visit the town centres in any of the South Auckland suburbs, or any suburb with a large population of Pacific peoples, to see how Pacific people have transcended old stereotypes associated with such fabric designs.

The use of tapa on the other hand has a strong

resonance with the Pacific, particularly the island groups that produced this natural material in the past and still continue to do so today. While the artist may have hoped that the recycled tapa used in *Transit of Venus* (2005), *Stomachers and Pockets* (2007), and *Into the Southern Hemisphere* (2012) is not identified with a particular island group, those like myself who are familiar with Tongan ngatu would know that recycled Tongan ngatu tāhina is used in these works. However, despite the strong resonance of tapa, the way that the material has been constructed into various European forms dominates the physical presence of the works in these suites. There is an exception with the stomachers from the *Stomachers and Pockets* (2007). The series made up of eight individual stomachers are beautifully executed using a range of materials that include tapa, shells, seeds, sennit and hibiscus fibre. The stomachers while European inform, have a strong Pacific feel. For example, *Stomacher VII* and *Stomacher VIII* are reminiscent of motifs featured on tapa from Tonga, Sāmoa and Fiji. They also look like a kupesi or design tablets used to imprint designs on to the surface of the Tongan ngatu tāhina. The series of *Stomacher I* to *Stomacher VI* also have strong connections to Pacific costume and adornment.

The printed images on Torr's *Pa'i Ki'i* (2003) suite have a strong Pacific presence. Two works feature images of Sāmoan men and women taken by photographer Thomas Andrew in the nineteenth century and a third work is printed with images of Hawaiian Princess Victoria Kamāmalu, Ka'ahumanu IV (1838–1866) taken in Hawai'i in 1865 wearing a European style gown. This suite was intended by the artist to represent the 'European Gaze' that led to terminologies such as 'Dusky Maiden', 'Noble Savage', and 'Pacific Princess', which Torr has used as the titles of her three works. I would question whether reusing such terminologies, in association with the use of repetitive images of unknown faces of Sāmoan men and women, and of Princess Victoria Kamāmalu, does not run the risk of reinforcing these stereotypes. A question I have of this suite is about the appropriateness of using images of people, especially that of Hawaiian royalty, given the common knowledge of the taboos associated with a person's head, especially if that person is of royal or chiefly blood.

Another important Pacific marker in Torr's sculptures is her use of various island vernaculars in the title of some of her works and their connection to the source of inspiration for specific suites. It is interesting that apart from *The Gauguin Suite* (2001) where Torr used the same titles as Gauguin's paintings which include the English translation, the other works only use the Pacific language. I do question whether it may be confusing to use the Hawaiian vernacular in the title *Pa'iKi'i* (2003) suite when two of the works feature Sāmoan content.

Although the richness and depth of Torr's Pacific inspired suites are found in the intangible stories and references, there are Pacific elements present on the physical sculptures themselves that invite viewers to engage with her works. This was highlighted with my first encounter of Torr's work where I was drawn to the *Transit of Venus* (2004) suite because one of the sculptures was made of tapa. It was the immediate recognition of the material that captured my interest which then drew me in to uncover the layers behind the suite and in turn, appreciate a particular historical moment of cultural exchange. This is the appeal of Torr's works for me. Her Pacific inspired works, while European in form, are embedded with narratives that require our active participation. Whether you decide to engage or not may determine a deeper level of understanding and appreciation of Torr's works.

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*Kolokesa Uafā Māhina-Tuai*

A freelance curator and writer with a background in Art History, Anthropology and Museum and Heritage Studies from both Auckland and Victoria Universities. She was former Curator Pacific Cultures at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa where she co-curated the current *Tangata o le Moana: The Story of Pacific People in New Zealand* exhibition. Her recent exhibitions, projects and writings challenge the current understanding of Pacific Arts.

# Ambiguities and Nudities: Jo Torr — Clothing, Culture and Art

It is axiomatic that clothing can be art or exist in a close relationship with art as demonstrated by Surrealist-inspired couturier Elsa Schiaparelli (1890–1973). Certainly much of what sashays down the runways of New York and Milan strive for artwork status through its virtual. Traffic in the opposite direction has been less common, but makes the occasional appearance such as those found in the experiments of the Bauhaus, Joseph Boyce, Lygia Clark, Louise Bourgeois, and Yinka Shonibare's tableaux recreations of canonical western artworks in Ghanaian Kente cloth. One might also look to Beijing-based Li Xiaofeng's ensembles made from shards of Song, Ming, Yuan and Qing dynasty porcelain.[4] Closer to home, the World of Wearable Art (WoW) event has been playfully exploring this nexus of costume and art since 2001.

Jo Torr is an artist who has adopted the forms of clothing as the structural and metaphorical basis of her oeuvre. Her work explores, in her own words, "the types of cultural exchange that have happened, and continue to happen, between Polynesian and non-Polynesian peoples — the way that we change by contact with one another… and the ideas that form our notion of what is 'Pacific'."[5] Torr's art objects tend to reference costume directly as a sculptural medium in which to work and project new meanings and contexts upon.[6] At the same time, each costume remains a potentially functional, wearable item or collection of items for all their symbolism. Clothing as art reminds us that the human body consists of an endlessly fascinating suite of intrinsic geometries and ratios. Clothing allows us to outwardly express our emotions, values, attitudes, beliefs, ideas through a broad palette of forms, patterns, textures, colours and motions. Clothing for humans is both an armour and a projection of our physical/spiritual hybrid form, our aura of consciousness and authenticity made visible and tactile.

Torr is by no means the first artist to take up a creative process traditionally seen as subordinate, and in this case socially feminine, in order to express marginalised identities. The great-grandmother of this approach is probably Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974–76, on permanent display in the Brooklyn Museum, New York) with its appropriation of ceramics in particular. Torr's oeuvre primarily concentrates on the costume traditions of Europe and the South Pacific in the eighteenth century when these two cultures first came into lasting contact, and on into the nineteenth century period of colonisation, and the Pacific migrations of the twentieth century. In Torr's work costume becomes a site of discourse and memory in the same way that Chicago's vaginal plates do, and also carry cultural associations, baggage even, specific to apparel. However, just as the grid was at the heart of Polynesian visual culture centuries before Western modernism discovered it, Torr's visual tropes find descriptive resonances with the history of Pacific/Western interaction.

Jacques Derrida opens his *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (1997) with a discussion of the Book of Genesis and Adam's realisation of his own nudity upon eating the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Rather than read this as humanity's fall from grace, Derrida interprets this as the initiating moment in the creation of humanity, as he puts it, "In principle, with the exception of man, no animal has ever thought to dress itself. [Thus] clothing would be proper to man, one of the 'properties' of man. 'Dressing oneself' would be inseparable from all the other figures of what is 'proper to man,' even if one talks about it less than speech or reason, the logos, history, laughing, mourning, burial, the gift, etc."[7] On the one hand this suggests that dress and adornment, like art, represent human commonalities despite cultural differences. It also suggests that style of dress is a kind of social currency that goes beyond merely transmitting social status, wealth, taste or subculture.

In the history of the Pacific, this notion of currency is problematic as western dress also carries with it the imprint of colonisation. For European missionaries, Pacific nudity was synonymous with sinfulness and degradation. Protestant missionary Clarissa Richards (1794–1861) recorded her first impressions of Hawai'ian islanders upon her arrival in 1823. "Now I saw them," she wrote, "wretched, degraded, ignorant… and yet my heart bled for them.

They were destitute of clothing except a narrow strip of cloth twisted about their loins." Another Protestant missionary, Sybil Moseley Bingham (1792–1848) had also disparaged the "spiritual and literal nakedness" of Hawai'ians upon her first landing a full three years previously.[8] The 'dressing' of indigenous peoples in western clothing became part of the colonial and missionary imperative. Clothes were culture, civilisation, and the outward manifestation of the immortal soul.

This was not an entirely a one-sided transaction. The benign climate of the Pacific meant that for Island cultures clothing was less about necessity (or nudity) than it was about adornment, culture and social hierarchy. Dress and art (for want of less culturally specific terms) were conflated.[9] These are issues that Torr in her role at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa is attuned to. Western dress, especially textiles, was adapted to Pacific aesthetic sensibilities and motifs, initiating a tradition that flourishes today in events like the Westfield Style Pasifika fashion event (since 1994) and in more mundane arenas such as beachwear. In the opposite direction, one can look to the woodblock fabric prints created by A.R.D. Fairburn in the late 1940s based on Theo Schoon's interpretation of 'Moa Hunter' rock drawings, the enormous popularity of the 'Aloha' or Hawai'ian shirt in the post-War period, and other assimilations of the 'exotic' into modernism and modernity. Torr, while innovating and self-aware as a fine artist, is nonetheless participating in a long tradition of artistic and cultural transaction and discourse.

In Torr's work, both cut and period of dress, and the fabric the garment is made from, combine to act as an anchorage for social-historical memory. The *Plantae Oceaniae* series (2006), for example, alludes with tapa cloth frockcoats embroidered with native flora to the contributions of the naturalists like Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander who explored the Pacific with Captain Cook in the Age of Reason. The series *The Society Islands* (2008) represents various Pacific cultures by combining different indigenous motifs with the simple cotton 'Mother Hubbard' dresses[10] widely encouraged by Christian missionaries to cover the 'nakedness' of Island cultures to the point of ubiquity in the Pacific. The dress *Hihimā* from the series *Ngā Kākahu* (2009) combines the traditional Māori piupiu decoration with white blankets (a favourite colonial method of barter with indigenous peoples), and a kākahu in a Scottish tartan, signifying the tradition of intermarriage between Māori and equally tribal (and similarly marginalised) early Scottish settlers.[11] *The Gauguin Suite* (2001) combines the anachronistic cut of turn of the century colonial Pacific fashion with the vibrant fabrics more often associated with Hawai'ian shirts and lava lava. *The Nu`u Sila* suite (2002) constructs 1950s-style garments from tapa patterned printed cotton as a metaphor for the mass migration of Pacific peoples who came to New Zealand at that time in search of a better economic opportunities — a visual hybridisation of Pacific and Palangi worlds alluding to the culture shock and subsequent adaption.[12]

Torr's garment-sculptures represent a powerful confluence of themes and ideas. In her work the garment becomes an articulated palimpsest of Pacific history and postcolonial identity that may be worn (thus interacting with the physical body and external social and physical space) or stand alone as passive, contemplative objects. The artworks are entirely postmodern in their defiance of hierarchy, category, and genre in their suturing together of Pacific and European, embroidery, dressmaking and craft with social historiography and the philosophical and the conceptual aesthetics of the fine arts. They are unique documents of our place and time.

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# Notes

1 Myers, R., *The Blind Idealists Black Dog*, Southland Museum and Art Gallery, 2012

2 This exhibition opened in 2007 and is currently one of Te Papa's long-term exhibitions.

3 Refer to Salmond, A 'Visitors: Tupaia, the Navigator Priest' (pp.57–75) and Mallon, S 'Little-Known Lives: Pacific Islanders in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand' (pp. 77–95) in Mallon, S., Māhina-Tuai, K., Salesa, D. (2012) *Tangata o le Moana: New Zealand and the people of the Pacific*. Wellington, NZ :Te Papa Press, 2012.

4 In 2010 Li Xiaofeng created a limited edition polo for Lacoste.

5 2004, cited in "Jo Torr: Tupaia's Paintbox" for the exhibition of the same name at City Gallery, Wellington in 2005, http://citygallery.org.nz/exhibition/jo-torr accessed 15/02/2013

6 New Zealand artists Ruth Watson did something similar in her exhibition *Without Parachute* (The Physics Room, Christchurch, 2002) which incorporated a dress in the Late Victorian style made of silk laboriously printed with black and white aerial photographs of the Canterbury Plains as an allusion to European colonisation.

7 Jacques Derrida (2008), *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, (Ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, Trns. David Wills), New York: Fordham University Press, p5.

8 Clarissa Lyman Richards, journal, April 23, 1823, Journals Collection, Hawai'ian Mission Children's Society Archives, Honolulu; S. M. Bingham, journal, March 31, 1820.

9 Māori being a partial exception. New Zealand's colder climate necessitated the adaption of many Pacific technologies, the innovation of new ones (like pounamu carving) and the discarding of others (tapa production, because apart from a few remnants in Northland, the Paper Mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera, syn. Morus papyrifera L.*) does not thrive in New Zealand).

10 A Mother Hubbard dress is a long, loose-fitting garment intended to cover the body and introduced to the Pacific by missionaries during the Victorian period to "civilise" the indigenous peoples. Forms of it are still worn by some Pacific women, who have modified it into a more colourful and less heavy garment, using cotton sheets. In Hawai'i it is the *v* and without the yoke and train, the *mu'umu'u* — familiar in the west as the muumuu or bed jacket of the boudoir. In Tahiti, it is the *'ahu tua* or (French) empire dress, now called *'ahu māmā rū'au* or 'grandmother dress'. In Samoa and Tonga, the design is called *puletasi* and *puletaha* respectively and takes a two-piece form. In the Marshall Islands it is the wau, derived from the name of the Hawai'an island O'ahu. They are *robes missions* in New Caledonia, and *meri blaus* in Papua New Guinea. Somerset Maugham refers to them consistently in his Pacific novels and short stories as a kind of shorthand to establish a sense of place.

11 This has sympathies with Rokahurihia Ngarimu-Cameron's exhibition of contemporary adaptations of traditional weaving Cloaks: *Maumahara / Remember* at Canterbury Museum, Christchurch in 2010. Auckland is now the largest Polynesian city in the world — the de facto capital of the Polynesian triangle. While the dominant civic visual identity and urban culture of Auckland have a distinct Polynesian flavour, it is no longer a predominantly Māori one.

# List of Works

***The Gauguin Suite* 2001**
*Gauguin Gown*
*Vahine no te Tiare – Woman with a Flower*
*Mata Mua – Former Times*
*Tifaifai*
*Te Arii Vahine – The Noble Woman*
***Nu`u Sila* 2002**
*Nu`u Sila*
*Uelingatoni*
*'Okalani*
***Pa`i Ki`i* 2003**
*Hawaiian Princess*
*Dusky Maiden*
*Noble Savage*
***Transit of Venus* 2004**
*Transit of Venus I*
*Transit of Venus II*
*Transit of Venus III*
***Tupaia's Paintbox* 2005**
*Tupaia's Paintbox – Barter* (waistcoat)
*Tupaia's Paintbox – Chief Mourner* (waistcoat)
*Tupaia's Paintbox – Dancing Girl of Raiatea* (waistcoat)
*Tupaia's Paintbox – Musicians* (waistcoat)
*Tupaia's Paintbox – Longhouse* (waistcoat)
***Tupaia's Paintbox* 2007**
*Tupaia's Paintbox – Barter* (coat)
*Tupaia's Paintbox – Chief Mourner* (coat)
***Plantae Oceaniae* 2006**
*Pacific Crossings*
*Pacific Paradise* (coat and waistcoat)
*Pacific Flora* (coat and waistcoat)
*Pinxit* (coat and waistcoat)
***Stomachers* 2007**
*Stomacher I*
*Stomacher II*
*Stomacher III*
*Stomacher IV*
*Stomacher V*
*Stomacher VI*
*Stomacher VII*
*Stomacher VIII*
*Stomacher IX*
***Pockets* 2007**
*Kowhai*
*Hibiscus*
*Rata*
***The Society Islands* 2008**
*Tahiti*
*Bora Bora*
*Raiatea*
*Taha'a*
*Huahine*
*Tetiaroa*
***Ngā Kākahu* 2009**
*Kaitaka*
*Korowai*
*Ngore*
***Ngā Kākahu* 2010**
*Hihimā*
***The Blind Idealist's Black Dog* 2011**
*Whale gown*
*Albatross gown*
*Seal coat*
*Megaherb gown*
*Crockery gown*
*Right Whale corset*
*Sperm Whale corset*
***Into the Southern Hemisphere* 2012**
*Britannia*
*Tupaia*
*Transit of Venus IV*
***Ngā Kākahu* 2013**
*Kaitaka Paepaeroa*
*Tāniko*

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*Vahine no te Tiare – Woman with a Flower*
***The Gauguin Suite* 2001**
printed and unprinted cotton, plastic flowers
1870s style gown, 3 parts: bodice, skirt, overskirt
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

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*Uelingatoni*
***Nu`u Sila* 2002**
printed and unprinted cotton, shells
1950s style day dress, 3 parts:
dress, belt, petticoat
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Dusky Maiden*
***Pa`i Ki`i* 2003**
printed and unprinted cotton, shells
1860s style gown, 3 parts:
bodice, skirt, crinoline
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Transit of Venus III*
***Transit of Venus* 2004**
barkcloth (tapa), shells
1770s style gown, 3 parts:
gown, skirt, panniers
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

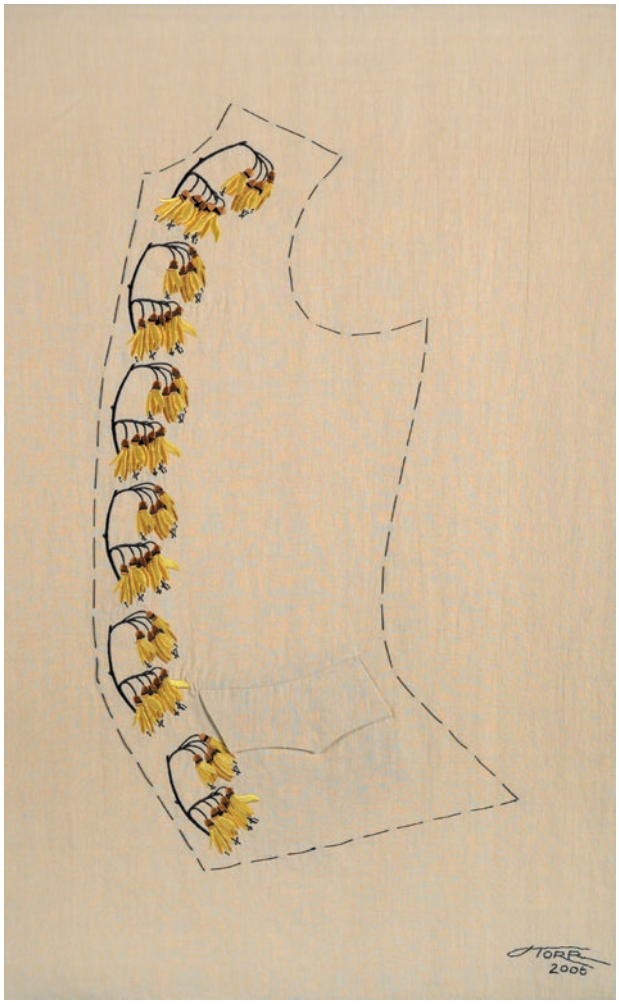
*Tupaia's Paintbox – Musicians* (waistcoat)
***Tupaia's Paintbox* 2005**
embroidered barkcloth (tapa),)
1770s style uncut waistcoat front
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Tupaia's Paintbox – Longhouse* (waistcoat)
***Tupaia's Paintbox* 2005**
embroidered barkcloth (tapa),
1770s style uncut waistcoat front
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Tupaia's Paintbox – Barter* (coat)
***Tupaia's Paintbox* 2007**
embroidered barkcloth (tapa), 1770s style uncut coat front
Collection of the artist, courtesy of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Pinxit* (waistcoat)
***Plantae Oceaniae* 2006**
embroidered linen
1770s style uncut waistcoat front
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Pinxit* (coat)
***Plantae Oceaniae* 2006**
embroidered wool
1770s style uncut coat front
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery




*Stomacher I*
***Stomachers* 2007**
tapa (barkcloth), shells, sennit, cotton
1770s style stomacher
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Stomacher III*
***Stomachers* 2007**
barkcloth (tapa), shells, cotton
1770s style stomacher
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Stomacher IV*
***Stomachers* 2007**
barkcloth (tapa), Hibiscus fibre, cotton
1770s style stomacher
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Stomacher V*
***Stomachers* 2007**
barkcloth (tapa), shells, sennit, cotton
1770s style stomacher
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Stomacher VI*
***Stomachers* 2007**
barkcloth (tapa), shells, seeds, cotton
1770s style stomacher
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Stomacher VII*
***Stomachers* 2007**
barkcloth (tapa), sennit, seeds, cotton
1770s style stomacher
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Stomacher VIII*
***Stomachers* 2007**
barkcloth (tapa), sennit, cotton
1770s style stomacher
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Hibiscus*
***Pockets* 2007**
embroidered barkcloth (tapa), cotton
1770s style stomacher
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Rata*
***Pockets* 2007**
embroidered barkcloth (tapa), cotton
1770s style stomacher
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

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*Tahiti*
***The Society Islands* 2008**
embroidered barkcloth (tapa)
late 1770s early 1800s style gown
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Bora Bora*
***The Society Islands* 2008**
printed cotton
late 1770s early 1800s style gown
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Huahine*
***The Society Islands* 2008**
embroidered barkcloth (tapa), mother-of-pearl
late 1770s early 1800s style gown
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

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*Raiatea*
***The Society Islands* 2008**
embroidered barkcloth (tapa), pearls
late 1770s early 1800s style gown
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Taha'a*
***The Society Islands* 2008**
printed cotton, mother-of-pearl
late 1770s early 1800s style gown
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Tetiaroa*
***The Society Islands* 2008**
printed silk/cotton, mother-of-pearl
late 1770s early 1800s style gown
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Kaitaka*
***Ngā Kākahu* 2009**
recycled woollen blankets, needlepoint, mother-of-pearl
1880s style gown, parts: bodice, skirt, crinoline
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Hihimā*
***Ngā Kākahu* 2010**
recycled woollen blankets, cotton, Pohutukawa flowers
1880s style gown, 3 parts: jacket, skirt, crinoline
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Kaitaka Paepaeroa*
***Ngā Kākahu* 2013**
embroidered recycled woollen blankets
1880s style jacket
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Tāniko*
***Ngā Kākahu* 2013**
needlepoint, linen
1880s style waistcoat
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Megaherb gown*
***The Blind Idealist's Black Dog* 2011**
printed cotton
1850s style gown, 2 parts: gown, crinoline
Collection of the Southland Museum & Art Gallery

*Right Whale corset*
***The Blind Idealist's Black Dog* 2011**
embroidered linen and cotton
1850s style chemise and corset, 2 parts: chemise, corset
Collection of the Southland Museum & Art Gallery

*Britannia*
***Into the Southern Hemisphere* 2012**
embroidered barkcloth (tapa), cotton, pandanus, ribbbon
1770s style undergarments, 3 parts:
chemise, stays, hooped petticoat
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

*Tupaia*
***Into the Southern Hemisphere* 2012**
embroidered barkcloth (tapa), cotton, coins
1770s style coat and waistcoat
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of the Mark Hutchins Gallery

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